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42-year-old Idaho Army National Guard soldier from Star shot in Afghanistan

Bergdahl emails express discontent

Published: June 7, 2012 Updated 10 hours ago

Bowe Bergdahl

Anonymous — AP

By The Associated Press and Statesman staff

WASHINGTON — The messages that Hailey soldier Bowe Bergdahl reportedly sent to his parents before he was captured by the Taliban three years ago suggest he was disillusioned and considering deserting.

Bergdahl told his parents that he was "ashamed to even be American" and disgusted with the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and with the Army, according to emails quoted in Rolling Stone magazine.

Bergdahl, an Army sergeant who is now 26, was taken prisoner on June 30, 2009, in Afghanistan.

The military has never detailed circumstances of his disappearance or capture, and he is not classified as a deserter. He was initially listed as "duty status unknown" and is now considered "missing-captured." He is the only U.S. prisoner of war from the Afghanistan conflict, and U.S. officials say they are trying to free him.

The White House declined comment on the emails or Bergdahl's possible motivation for leaving his base in eastern Afghanistan.

Bergdahl is the subject of a proposed prisoner swap in which he would be traded for five Taliban adherents imprisoned by the United States at the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Taliban have walked away from the deal and larger negotiations with the U.S., but the Obama administration is still pushing a negotiated settlement between the Taliban and the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan.

The seven-page article on Bergdahl appears in the June 21 issue of Rolling Stone magazine but has been published online. It was written by Michael Hastings, who wrote a controversial 2010 article about Gen. Stanley McChrystal that led to the general's ouster.

The Rolling Stone article quotes soldiers and associates saying that Bergdahl talked about walking to Pakistan if his deployment was "lame." Shortly before his disappearance, he asked whether he should take his weapon if he left the base.

Friends and other soldiers describe a survivalist mentality, and Bergdahl's father, Bob, told the magazine that his son was "living in a novel."

The emails were provided to the magazine by Bergdahl's family, which has gone public with its discontent with U.S. efforts to free him. There is no way to authenticate the emails.

Some of Bergdahl's words read like a suicide note: "I am sorry for everything. The horror that is America is disgusting."

He mailed home boxes containing his uniform and books.

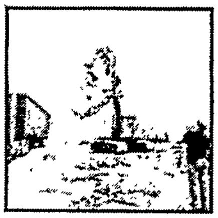
In the final email the family received, on June 27, 2009, Bergdahl expressed extreme disillusionment with the war.

"The future is too good to waste on lies," he wrote. "And life is way too short to care for the damnation of others, as well as to spend it helping fools with their ideas that are wrong. I have seen their ideas and I am ashamed to even be American. The horror of the self-righteous arrogance that they thrive in. It is all revolting."

Bergdahl's father said his son tried to join the French Foreign Legion at age 20 but was not accepted.

He enlisted in the Army in 2008 and was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division at Fort Richardson, Alaska. He deployed to Afghanistan as a machine gunner in May 2009.

Back to Top
< Previous Story



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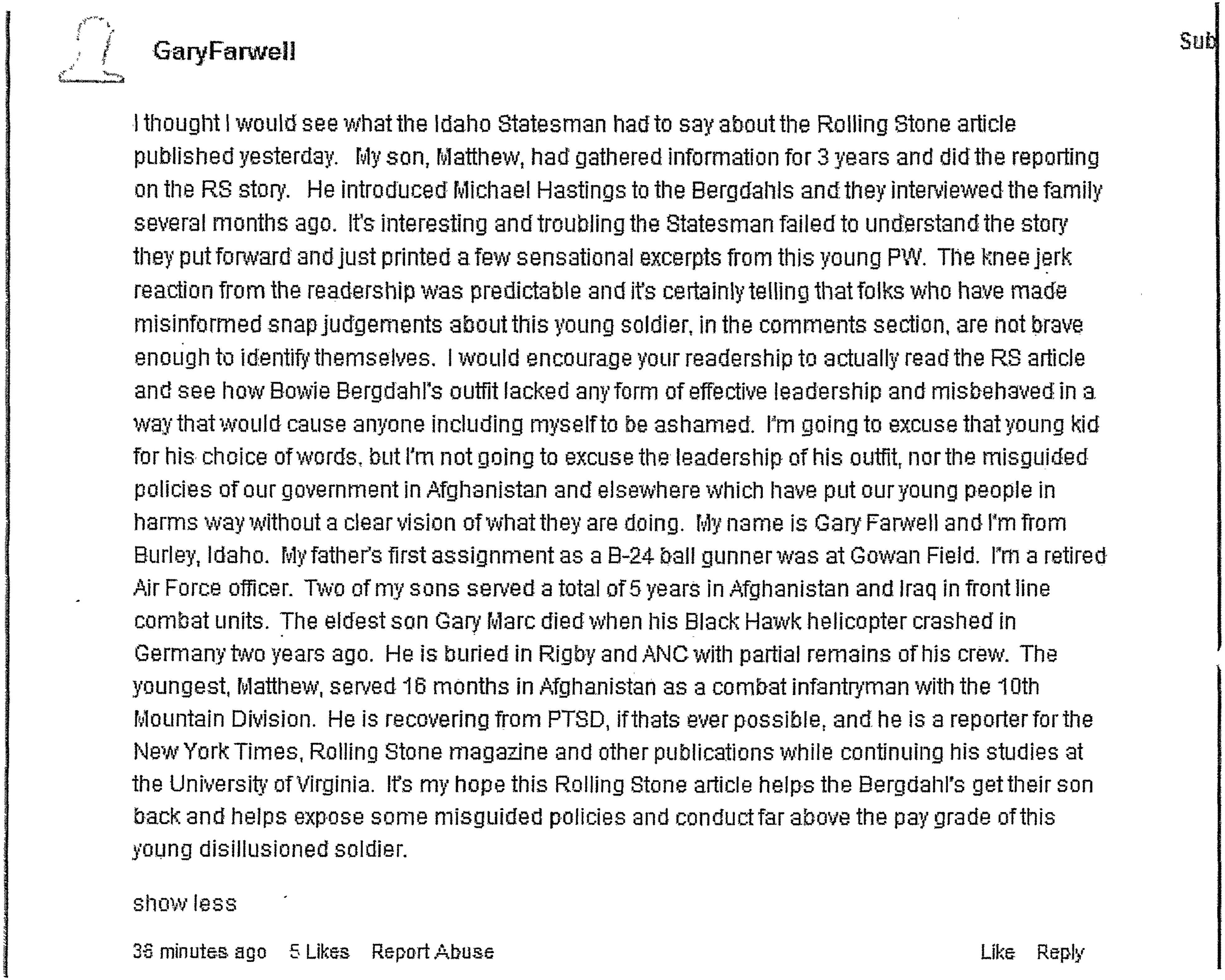

GaryFarwell

I thought I would see what the Idaho Statesman had to say about the Rolling Stone article published yesterday. My son, Matthew, had gathered information for 3 years and did the reporting on the RS story. He introduced Michael Hastings to the Bergdahls and they interviewed the family several months ago. It's interesting and troubling the Statesman failed to understand the story they put forward and just printed a few sensational excerpts from this young PW. The knee jerk reaction from the readership was predictable and it's certainly telling that folks who have made misinformed snap judgements about this young soldier, in the comments section, are not brave enough to identify themselves. I would encourage your readership to actually read the RS article and see how Bowie Bergdahl's outfit lacked any form of effective leadership and misbehaved in a way that would cause anyone including myself to be ashamed. I'm going to excuse that young kid for his choice of words, but I'm not going to excuse the leadership of his outfit, nor the misguided policies of our government in Afghanistan and elsewhere which have put our young people in harms way without a clear vision of what they are doing. My name is Gary Farwell and I'm from Burley, Idaho. My father's first assignment as a B-24 ball gunner was at Gowan Field. I'm a retired Air Force officer. Two of my sons served a total of 5 years in Afghanistan and Iraq in front line combat units. The eldest son Gary Marc died when his Black Hawk helicopter crashed in Germany two years ago. He is buried in Rigby and ANC with partial remains of his crew. The youngest, Matthew, served 16 months in Afghanistan as a combat infantryman with the 10th Mountain Division. He is recovering from PTSD, if thats ever possible, and he is a reporter for the New York Times, Rolling Stone magazine and other publications while continuing his studies at the University of Virginia. It's my hope this Rolling Stone article helps the Bergdahl's get their son back and helps expose some misguided policies and conduct far above the pay grade of this young disillusioned soldier.

RollingStone

America's Last Prisoner of War

Three years ago, a 23-year-old soldier walked off his base in Afghanistan and into the hands of the Taliban. Now he's a crucial pawn in negotiations to end the war. Will the Pentagon leave a man behind?

by MICHAEL HASTINGS
JUNE 07, 2012

The mother and father sit at the kitchen table in their Idaho farmhouse, watching their son on YouTube plead for his life. The Taliban captured 26-year-old Bowe Bergdahl almost three years ago, on June 30th, 2009, and since that day, his parents, Jani and Bob, have had no contact with him. Like the rest of the world, their lone glimpses of Bowe – the only American prisoner of war left in either Iraq or Afghanistan – have come through a series of propaganda videos, filmed while he's been in captivity.

The Rise of the Killer Drones: How America Goes to War in Secret

In **the video** they're watching now, Bowe doesn't look good. He's emaciated, maybe 30 pounds underweight, his face sunken, his eye sockets like caves. He's wearing a scraggly beard and he's talking funny, with some kind of foreign accent. Jani presses her left hand across her forehead, as if shielding herself from the images onscreen, her eyes filling with tears. Bob, unable to look away, hits play on the MacBook Pro for perhaps the 30th time. Over and over again, he watches as his only son, dressed in a ragged uniform, begs for someone to rescue him.

"Release me, please!" Bowe screams at the camera. "I'm begging you – bring me home!"

My Decade of bin Laden, by Michael Hastings

Private First Class Bowe Bergdahl arrived in Afghanistan at the worst possible moment, just as President Barack Obama had ordered the first troop surge in the spring of 2009. Rather than withdraw from a disastrous and increasingly deadly war started by his predecessor, the new commander in chief had decided to escalate the conflict, tripling the number of troops to 100,000 and employing a counterinsurgency strategy that had yet to demonstrate any measurable success. To many on Obama's staff, who had been studying *Lessons in Disaster*, a book about America's failure in Vietnam, the catastrophe to come seemed almost preordained. "My God," his deputy national security adviser Tom Donilon said at the time. "What are we getting this guy into?" Over the next three years, 13,000 Americans would be killed or wounded in Afghanistan – more than during the previous eight years of war under George W. Bush.

Bowe's own tour of duty in Afghanistan mirrored the larger American experience in the war – marked by tragedy, confusion, misplaced idealism, deluded thinking and, perhaps, a moment of insanity. And it is with Bowe that the war will likely come to an end. On May 1st, in a surprise visit to Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan, President Obama announced that the United States will now pursue "a negotiated peace" with the Taliban. That peace is likely to include a prisoner swap – or a "confidence-building measure," as U.S. officials working on the negotiations call it – that could finally end the longest war in America's history. Bowe is the one prisoner the Taliban have to trade. "It could be a huge win if Obama could bring him home," says a senior administration official familiar with the negotiations. "Especially in an election year, if it's handled properly."

Bowe Robert Bergdahl was born in Sun Valley, Idaho, on March 28th, 1986 – the same day as Lady Gaga, as his parents like to point out. Bob and Jani had moved to Idaho from California after college, building a small, two-bedroom home on 40 acres of farmland not far from the small town of Hailey, deep in the mountains of Wood River Valley. His father worked construction, his mother odd jobs, living the life of ski bums, nearly off the grid. In 1983, the year Bowe's older sister Sky was born, his parents pulled in $7,000 and paid off the hospital bills for her birth with weekly $20 deposits.

Rather than put their kids in the local school system, Jani and Bob home-schooled Bowe and his sister. Devout Calvinists, they taught the children for six hours a day, instructing them in religious thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine. "Ethics and morality would be constant verbiage in our conversations," his father recalls. "Bowe was definitely instilled with truth. He was very philosophical about perceiving ethics."

By the age of five, Bowe had also learned to shoot a .22 rifle and to ride horses. He developed a love for dirt bikes and immersed himself in boy's adventure tales – anything that had to do with sailing and the ocean – as well as cartoons. His favorite was *Beetle Bailey*, the comic-strip antihero who shambles through life in the Army as a permanent fuck-up.

By the time he was 16, Bowe had grown restless with his home-schooling – and his parents. He began to explore the wider world, and became obsessed with learning how to fence. At a nearby fencing studio, which also offered ballet classes, he was recruited by a beautiful local girl to be a "lifter" – the guy who holds the girl aloft in a ballet sequence. He soon moved in with the girl, whose family owned a tea shop in Ketchum, and made it his second home. The matriarch of the household, Kim Harrison, introduced him to Buddhism and Tarot cards. Bowe repaid his new family by doing construction work on their home. "To me, it was the normal path teenagers take," says Bob. "Like going to college – you get into all this stuff."

At 20, Bowe went even farther afield in search of the kind of boy's adventure that had mesmerized him for years: He decided to join the French Foreign Legion, the infantry force made up of foreigners who want "to start a new life," as the legion's recruiting website puts it. He traveled to Paris and started to learn French, but his application was rejected. "He was absolutely devastated when the French Foreign Legion didn't take him," Bob says. "They just didn't want an American home-schooled in Idaho. They just said no way." Bowe pored over a survival and combat handbook written by a former member of the British special forces, and he gravitated toward the TV show *Man vs. Wild*, hosted by another legendary British soldier. "This became his role model," his father says. "He is Bear Grylls in his own mind."

Returning home from Europe, Bowe drifted for the next few years, working mainly as a barista at Zaney's, a local coffee shop in Hailey. But he kept dreaming of ways to pursue something bigger. In 2008, he spoke to a family friend who was working as a missionary in Uganda about going over to Africa to teach "self-defense techniques" to villagers being targeted by brutal militias like the Lord's

Resistance Army. He and his father even fantasized about the creation of a special operations unit to "kill these fucks" in Africa, imagining that "someone needed to run an op with some military people dressed up like U.N. people" to take out warlords in Darfur and Sudan. Before a spot in the friend's missionary program could open up, though, Bowe had decided on a different adventure.

One day that spring, Bowe called his mother. "Mom, I need to talk to you and Dad about something," he said. He stopped by the house that Saturday, when his father was home from work.

"I'm thinking about joining the Army," Bowe told his parents.

"You're thinking about joining?" his father asked. "Or you already signed on the dotted line?"

"Well, yeah," Bowe admitted.

Bowe's mother wished he had enlisted in a different branch, like the Navy, that wouldn't have put him on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan. His father did what he always did with his son's dreams. "I just tried to be supportive," Bob says.

But what Bowe found in the Army, according to his parents, was a "deception" – one that started from the moment he was recruited. Bowe had been enticed to join the Army, they say, with the promise that he would be going overseas to help Afghan villagers rebuild their lives and learn to defend themselves – "the whole COIN thing," says Bob, citing the shorthand for America's strategy of counterinsurgency. "We were given a fictitious picture, an artificially created picture of what we were doing in Afghanistan."

After 16 weeks of training, Bowe graduated from infantry school in Fort Benning, Georgia, in the fall of 2008. While others in his training unit – A Company 2-58 – used their weekend passes to hit up strip clubs, Bowe hung out at Barnes & Noble and read books. He was already an expert shot from his days firing his .22 in the mountains of Idaho. When his parents attended the graduation, the drill sergeant told them, "Bowe was good to go when he got here." After completing the course, Bowe was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division in Fort Richardson, Alaska, not far from Anchorage. He arrived in October 2008.

At first, according to soldiers in his unit, Bowe seemed to embrace Army life. "He showed up, looked like a normal Joe," says former Specialist Jason Fry, who is now studying for a master's in theology. "When he first got to the unit, he was the leadership's pet. He read the *Ranger Handbook* like no other. Some people resented him for it." Bowe kept to himself, doing physical training on his own. "He never hung out with anyone, always in the background, never wanted to be in front of anything," says Fry. He surrounded himself with piles of books, including *Three Cups of Tea*, about a humanitarian crusade to educate girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as instructions on Zen meditation and an introductory ethics handbook with writings from Aristotle, Augustine, Kant and Hume.

After a month in Alaska, Bowe and his unit embarked for the National Training Center in Southern California to prepare for war. The NTC is a massive military installation in the Mojave Desert where real life combat situations are simulated under the most difficult conditions, often in extreme heat. It was a brutal experience for the platoon, and Bowe's unit struggled from the beginning. "The first week is incredibly stressful," a second lieutenant in the unit, Stephen Fancey, wrote on his blog. "I get overworked to the point where I start to get sick with a fever."

In his blog posts, which have since been removed from the Web, Fancey detailed a unit that seemed to have almost no discipline. The company's first sergeant, Fancey wrote, "calls the Captain a quitter, then calls me a quitter. Picture a 2nd LT screaming at a 1SG, who is screaming back in broken Puerto-Rican-fied English, and about 5 Privates sitting quietly in terror." As the combat simulations continued, the sergeant's behavior grew even more disturbing. He refused to go to the bathroom, preferring to pee into a Gatorade bottle by his bed, and he obsessed over his desire for a Diet Coke. After one botched operation, according to Fancey's blog, the first sergeant just gave up. "I need a Coca-Cola," he said. Then, upset at how screwed up the operation had become, he tore off his body armor and stormed off to his tent, screaming, "Fuck 'dis 'chit!"

Bowe's behavior, too, seemed odd at times. Fry remembers hearing "all kinds of crazy stories about him." He often came across more like a boy on an adventure than a soldier preparing for war. "My buddy was on an op, pulling guard duty," says Fry, recalling a joke that Bowe played. "Bergdahl was sneaking up on him like he was practicing techniques for the Battle of Wanat, on the other side." The U.S. base at Wanat, a remote village in Afghanistan, had been overrun by the Taliban four months earlier, leaving nine Americans dead and 27 wounded. It was one of the most deadly battles since the start of the war.

Bowe earned the nickname "SF," short for Special Forces – but it wasn't a compliment. "He loved pipe tobacco, didn't drink, smoke cigarettes," says Fry. "He did it more for the look." Fancey, now a captain stationed in North Carolina, recalls Bowe as "quiet. He wasn't one of the troublemakers – he was focused and well-behaved." While other soldiers spent Thanksgiving at the NTC playing PSP and reading *Playboy*, Bowe sat alone on his cot, studying maps of Afghanistan. He was also made a SAW gunner, responsible for providing automatic firepower for the squad, and he did exercises with his cumbersome 15-pound machine gun as though he were curling weights at the gym. "We saw him, and were like, 'Whoa, Mr. Intensity,'" says Fancey.

By the time the monthlong training session ended, the platoon was so notorious for screwing up that it had become a convenient scapegoat. At the firing range one day, another company failed to bring ammunition, and Bowe's unit took the flak. "We were heckled and blamed for not being prepared," Fancey wrote. "All said and done, NTC was an eye-opener and a bit of a disappointing one, at that."

It was also a disappointment to Bowe. He had entered the Army for the adventure, as a substitute for the French Foreign Legion, and here he was, shackled to a bunch of goof-offs. Bowe told Fry he didn't think the other soldiers in the unit were competent to fight. "He wanted to be a mercenary, wanted to be a free gun," says Fry. "He had a notion he was a survivalist, claimed he knew how to survive with nothing because he grew up in Idaho. He had stories of him doing crazy shit out in the woods for weeks in Idaho."

Over Christmas that year, Bowe went home to Hailey for the last time. He talked to his father and gave him his last will and testament. "He wanted to be buried at sea," his father recalls. "Typical. It's just this figment of his imagination. That's how he was seeing himself. This kid, from when he was 18, was hanging out with the elite. That's where his habits came from. He was living in a novel."

Returning to Alaska after Christmas, Bowe said something that would stick with Fry months later, long after they arrived in Afghanistan. "Before we deployed, when we were on Rear D, him and I were talking about what it would be like," Fry recalls. Bowe looked at his friend and made no bones about his plans. "If this deployment is lame," Bowe said, "I'm just going to walk off into the mountains of Pakistan."

n March 2009, Bowe's platoon arrived in Paktika, a province in eastern Afghanistan. Located on the

I border of Pakistan, the region is a stark landscape of imposing mountains and crushing poverty. According to the Army, 99 percent of Paktika is rural, and only six percent of households have access to electricity. The violence brought by the war has been equally extreme, with some 134 soldiers – including famed NFL player Pat Tillman – losing their lives in the province since the beginning of the conflict.

By that spring, when Bowe's unit arrived, the entire U.S. policy in Afghanistan appeared to be in chaos from the top down. President Obama had just fired Gen. David McKiernan, replacing him with Gen. Stanley McChrystal, and there was no longer a clear strategy in place.

The prolonged aspect of the war was also forcing the Pentagon to send more and more recruits who were unprepared and undisciplined, like Bowe's unit. To meet its recruiting goals, the Army had lowered its standards for intellectual aptitude, and allowed more waivers for recruits with felony convictions and drug problems. "One of every five recruits required a waiver to join the service, leading military analysts to conclude that the Army has lowered its standards," Col. Jeffrey McClain wrote in a definitive study for the Army War College in 2008, the year many in Bowe's unit joined up.

Bowe's platoon of some 25 men – under-manned by more than a third – was sent to a small combat outpost called Mest-Malak, near the village of Yaya Kheyl, where they were supposed to conduct counterinsurgency operations, attempting to win the local population over to the side of the Americans. Bowe had a serious staph infection in his leg, so he arrived at the outpost late. With his customary zeal, he'd been preparing for the deployment by learning how to speak Pashto and reading Russian military manuals. Almost as soon as he joined his fellow soldiers, he began to gravitate away from his unit. "He spent more time with the Afghans than he did with his platoon," Fry says. His father, recalling that time, would later describe his son to military investigators as "psychologically isolated."

The discipline problems that had plagued Bowe's unit back home only got worse when immersed in the fog of war. From the start, everything seemed to go wrong. In April, Lt. Fancey was removed from his post for clashing with a superior officer. He was replaced by Sgt. 1st Class Larry Hein, who had never held such a command – a move that left the remote outpost with no officers. According to four soldiers in the battalion, the removal of Fancey was quickly followed by a collapse in unit morale and an almost complete breakdown of authority.

The unruly situation was captured by Sean Smith, a British documentary filmmaker with *The Guardian* who spent a month embedded with Bowe's unit. His footage shows a bunch of soldiers who no longer give a shit: breaking even the most basic rules of combat, like wearing baseball caps on patrol instead of helmets. In footage from a raid on a family compound, an old Afghan woman screams at the unit, "Look at these cruel people!" One soldier bitches about what he sees as the cowardice of the Afghan villagers he is supposed to be protecting: "They say like, the Taliban comes down and aggravated their town and harasses them... Why don't you kill those motherfuckers? All of you have AKs. If someone is going into my hometown, I know my town wouldn't stand for that shit. I'd be like, 'Fuck you, you're dead.'" Another soldier laments, "These people just want to be left alone." A third agrees: "They got dicked with by the Russians for 17 years, and now we're here."

During the middle of May, Bowe went out on one of his first major missions. He described it in a detailed e-mail to his family dated May 23rd, 2009. What started as an eight-hour mission, Bowe recounted, ended up taking five days.

While another unit was setting up a night ambush in the mountains, an MRAP – the $1.5 million armored vehicle designed to protect soldiers from the roadside bombs being used by the Taliban – got hit with an IED. Bowe's platoon was deployed to escort a tow truck to get it down off the mountain. But on the way to escort the truck, an MRAP in Bowe's own platoon was hit by an IED. The unit found itself stuck in the mountains for four days, guarding the wreckage while their commanders debated whether to fly in the parts needed to fix the vehicles. Some of the time, Bowe wrote his family, was spent near a village that "was not too friendly to Americans" because it had been attacked by the Taliban. "So the elders were telling us to leave," he reported, "because the taliban was there, and we couldn't leave because command finely decided that they would fly in the parts (one MRAP needing a new engine) and would rebuild the MRAPs up there."

Once the MRAPs were finally fixed, the unit started to leave the mountains, only to be hit by yet another IED – the third of the mission – and to come under a blistering attack from rocket-propelled grenades. "It was at the point that the guys where beginning to climb into the trucks that the first RPG hit about 30m away from them," Bowe recounted, "and then the RPKs and the AKs began to splatter bullets on us, and all around us, the gunners where only able to see a few of them, and so where firing blindly the rest of the time, up into the trees and rocks. The .50 went down on the first shot on the truck i was in, and i had to hand up my SAW for the gunner to use. I sat there and watched, there was nothing else I was allowed to do."

No soldiers were killed in the ambush, but Bowe blamed the screw-up on his superiors: "Because command where too stupid to make up there minds of what to do," he wrote, "we where left to sit out in the middle of no where with no sopport to come till late mourning the next day." He concluded his e-mail with a nod to the absurdity of the situation: "The end of the 8 hour mission that took five days, and so here i am. But Afghanistan mountains are really beautiful!"

Over the next month, as he saw more of the war firsthand, Bowe's e-mails to his family lost their sense of absurdity and took on a darker edge. In one heartbreaking incident at the end of May, an Afghan official and four of his children were killed in a Taliban attack. The bodies were moved to Bowe's outpost, along with a wounded Afghan police officer.

In early June, after photographs taken by Sean Smith appeared in *The Guardian*, Bowe's unit got reamed out by its commander for its lack of discipline. Bowe's squad leader, Sgt. Greg Leatherman, was demoted, and two other sergeants in the squad were reassigned. According to Fancey, one was made "a gate guard for the rest of the deployment." As often happens in the Army, senior officers were going unpunished for screw-ups like the MRAP mission, while lower-ranking men paid the price for minor infractions.

The unit, for its part, continued to bungle even the most basic aspects of military duty. During the last week of June, the platoon spent a day resupplying at Forward Operating Base Sharana. When someone in the unit lost his weapon, everyone in the platoon had to drop what they were doing and look for it. To make matters worse, on an earlier trip to Sharana, 10 members of the platoon had been poached to pull guard duty at another base, leaving the unit even more undermanned than usual.

Then, on June 25th, Bowe's battalion suffered its first casualty of the deployment. A popular officer, 1st Lt. Brian Bradshaw, was killed in a blast from a roadside bomb near the village of Yaya Kheyl, not far from the outpost. Though Bradshaw was in a different company, the 24-year-old's death rocked the unit, shattering the sense of invulnerability that accompanies those who have just arrived in country. Bowe's father believes that Bradshaw and Bowe had grown close at the National Training Center, and his death darkened his son's mood. It was all too much for Bowe. On June 27th, he sent what would be his final e-mai to his parents. It was a lengthy message documenting his complete disillusionment with the war effort. He opened it by addressing it simply to "mom, dad."

"The future is too good to waste on lies," Bowe wrote. "And life is way too short to care for the damnation of others, as well as to spend it helping fools with their ideas that are wrong. I have seen their ideas and I am ashamed to even be american. The horror of the self-righteous arrogance that they thrive in. It is all revolting."

The e-mail went on to list a series of complaints: Three good sergeants, Bowe said, had been forced to move to another company, and "one of the biggest shit bags is being put in charge of the team." His battalion commander was a "conceited old fool." The military system itself was broken: "In the US army you are cut down for being honest... but if you are a conceited brown nosing shit bag you will be allowed to do what ever you want, and you will be handed your higher rank... The system is wrong. I am ashamed to be an american. And the title of US soldier is just the lie of fools." The soldiers he actually admired were planning on leaving: "The US army is the biggest joke the world has to laugh at. It is the army of liars, backstabbers, fools, and bullies. The few good SGTs are getting out as soon as they can, and they are telling us privates to do the same."

In the second-to-last paragraph of the e-mail, Bowe wrote about his broader disgust with America's approach to the war – an effort, on the ground, that seemed to represent the exact opposite of the kind of concerted campaign to win the "hearts and minds" of average Afghans envisioned by counterinsurgency strategists. "I am sorry for everything here," Bowe told his parents. "These people need help, yet what they get is the most conceited country in the world telling them that they are nothing and that they are stupid, that they have no idea how to live." He then referred to what his parents believe may have been a formative, possibly traumatic event: seeing an Afghan child run over by an MRAP. "We don't even care when we hear each other talk about running their children down in the dirt streets with our armored trucks... We make fun of them in front of their faces, and laugh at them for not understanding we are insulting them."

Bowe concluded his e-mail with what, in another context, might read as a suicide note. "I am sorry for everything," he wrote. "The horror that is america is disgusting." Then he signed off with a final message to his mother and father. "There are a few more boxes coming to you guys," he said, referring to his uniform and books, which he had already packed up and shipped off. "Feel free to open them, and use them."

On June 27th, at 10:43 p.m., Bob Bergdahl responded to his son's final message not long after he received it. His subject line was titled: OBEY YOUR CONSCIENCE!

"Dear Bowe," he wrote. "In matters of life and death, and especially at war, it is never safe to ignore ones' conscience. Ethics demands obedience to our conscience. It is best to also have a systematic oral defense of what our conscience demands. Stand with like minded men when possible." He signed it simply "dad."

Ordinary soldiers, especially raw recruits facing combat for the first time, respond to the horror of war in all sorts of ways. Some take their own lives: After years of seemingly endless war and repeat deployments, activeduty soldiers in the U.S. Army are currently committing suicide at a record rate, 25 percent higher than the civilian population. Other soldiers lash out with unauthorized acts of violence: the staff sergeant charged with murdering 17 Afghan civilians in their homes last March; the notorious "Kill Team" of U.S. soldiers who went on a shooting spree in 2010, murdering civilians for sport and taking parts of their corpses for trophies. Many come home permanently traumatized, unable to block out the nightmares.

Bowe Bergdahl had a different response. He decided to walk away.

In the early-morning hours of June 30th, according to soldiers in the unit, Bowe approached his team leader not long after he got off guard duty and asked his superior a simple question: If I were to leave the base, would it cause problems if I took my sensitive equipment?

Yes, his team leader responded – if you took your rifle and night-vision goggles, that would cause problems.

Bowe returned to his barracks, a roughly built bunker of plywood and sandbags. He gathered up water, a knife, his digital camera and his diary. Then he slipped off the outpost.

Bowe might have spent his childhood hiking in the mountains of Idaho, but the terrain he now faced was nothing like back home. To get to Pakistan, he would first have to descend some 1,500 feet from the mountain outpost and skirt the village of Yaya Kheyl, a town known for harboring Taliban. At that hour, there would be few people on the main road through Paktiki, dubbed "Route Audi" by U.S. forces. But as dawn broke, a stream of motorbikes and pedestrians would start to pass by. Alone, white-skinned and likely wearing his Army uniform, Bowe would have stood out immediately.

If Bowe made it through town, the next step would be even more daunting: He would have to slog eight miles through deep sand so fine that soldiers called it "moondust." If he was lucky, he might pick up a path used by Kuchi nomadic tribesmen to bring their sheep to market. Along the way, Bowe would pass grave sites: tall stacks of rocks marked by bright flags. Then he'd be forced to climb back up the switchbacks to Omna, where his platoon had been bogged down on its first major mission, traverse the Bermel Plateau, and once again scale mountain peaks to cross the border into Pakistan.

At 9:00 that morning, the acting platoon leader, Sgt. 1st Class Larry Hein, called in over the radio to report a missing soldier. According to sources in the battalion, this was the last thing Hein needed, given all the scrutiny the unit had been under. The men needed a break. Instead, they had to find a member of their platoon. "That was a shitty week for all of them," says one soldier in the unit.

By 11:37 a.m., a Predator drone was on station, monitoring the area with a call sign of VOODOO. At 2:10 p.m., a Pathfinder and a team of tracking dogs arrived at the small outpost. Five minutes later, another Predator drone began circling the area. At 2:42, Guardrail – an electronic intercept plane run by the same clandestine Army agency that killed Pablo Escobar – captured low-level voice intercepts picked up from radio or cellphone traffic. An American soldier with a camera was reportedly looking for someone who spoke English.

The search quickly escalated. No one knew whether Bowe was a deserter, a prisoner or a casualty. At that point he was simply listed as DUSTWUN – short for "Duty Status: Whereabouts Unknown." But either way, the Army wanted him back, fast. At 4:42 that afternoon, Col. Michael Howard, the senior officer responsible for three eastern provinces in Afghanistan, ordered that "all operations will cease until the missing soldier is found. All assets will be focused on the DUSTWUN situation and sustainment operations."

Within an hour, two F-18s were circling overhead. Afghan forces passed along intelligence that a U.S. soldier had been captured by the Taliban. By that evening, two F-15s – call sign DUDE-21 – had joined the search. A few minutes later, according to files obtained by WikiLeaks, a radio transmission intercepted by U.S. forces stated that the Taliban had captured three civilians and one U.S. soldier. The battalion leading the manhunt entered and searched three compounds in the area, but found nothing significant to report.

The next morning, more than 24 hours after Bowe had vanished, U.S. intelligence intercepted a conversation between two Taliban fighters:

"I SWEAR THAT I HAVE NOT HEARD ANYTHING YET. WHAT HAPPENED. IS THAT TRUE THAT THEY CAPTURED AN AMERICAN GUY?"

"YES THEY DID. HE IS ALIVE. THERE IS NO WHERE HE CAN GO (LOL)" "IS HE STILL ALIVE?"

"YES HE IS ALIVE. BUT I DONT HAVE THE WHOLE STORY. DONT KNOW IF THEY WERE FIGHTING. ALL I KNOW IF THEY WERE FIGHTING. ALL I KNOW THAT THEY CAPTURE HIM ALIVE AND THEY ARE WITH HIM RIGHT NOW."

Then another intercept was picked up:

"CUT THE HEAD OFF"

Later that evening, a final intercept confirmed that Bowe had been captured by the Taliban, who were preparing an ambush for the search party.

"WE ARE WAITING FOR THEM."

"LOL THEY KNOW WHERE HE IS BUT THEY KEEP GOING TO WRONG AREA."

"OK SET UP THE WORK FOR THEM."

"YES WE HAVE A LOT OF IED ON THE ROAD."

"GOD WILLING WE WILL DO IT."

"WE WERE ATTACKING THE POST HE WAS SITTING TAKING EXPLETIVE HE HAD NO GUN WITH HIM. HE WAS TAKING EXPLETIVE, HE HAS NOT CLEANED HIS BUTT YET." "WHAT SHAME FOR THEM."

"YES LOOK THEY HAVE ALL AMERICANS, ANA HELICOPTERS THE PLANES ARE LOOKING FOR HIM."

"I THINK HE IS BIG SHOT THAT WHY THEY ARE LOOKING FOR HIM."

A third voice chimed in:

"CAN YOU GUYS MAKE A VIDEO OF HIM AND ANNOUNCE IT ALL OVER AFGHANISTAN THAT WE HAVE ONE OF THE AMERICANS."

"WE ALREADY HAVE A VIDEO OF HIM."

The next day, American forces had a chance to free Bowe. The battalion operations officer, call sign GERONIMO 3, met with two tribal elders from the nearby village. The elders had been asked by the Taliban to arrange a trade with U.S. forces. The insurgents wanted 15 of their jailed fighters released, along with an unidentified sum of money, in exchange for Bowe. The officer hedged, unwilling or unable to make such a bargain, and no deal was struck. Instead, the Army ordered all units stationed in the eastern half of Afghanistan – known as RC East, in military jargon – to join the search for Bowe.

On July 4th, the search effort got a break: Bowe was spotted in a village in Ghazni, about 15 miles across the mountains to the west. He was wearing khaki, with a bag covering his head, and he was being driven in a black Toyota Corolla, escorted by three to five motorcycles. But by the time troops arrived to investigate, it was too late. That was the last time that Bowe would be seen until the **first propaganda video**, released later that month.

Over the next few months, Bowe's unit would be consumed with trying to find him. When Fancey, Bowe's former platoon leader, heard the news at the base where he had been reassigned, he couldn't believe what had happened to his former private. "I was like, 'What? You're joking, right?' The next few weeks, it was like we were in a movie. It was like, this shouldn't be real."

Back in Idaho, on the afternoon of June 30th, Bowe's mother, Jani, heard her dog Rufus barking. The gate to the driveway was closed. On the other side stood a pickup truck flanked by three men in Army uniforms. They were from the Idaho National Guard, and they'd driven down from Boise.

"Oh," she thought. "Why are they standing there?" Then the panic struck. "No, no, no," she thought. "He just got there."

Jani approached the men. "What do you want?" she asked.

"Is your husband home?" they replied. "Do you have anybody home with you?"

She asked what they wanted.

"We can't tell you," they said.

She told them her husband didn't have a cellphone, so she called UPS, where Bob has worked for 28 years. Then UPS texted him on their internal message system. Bob met Jani and the three officers in the parking lot of the UPS depot, about 10 miles from the Bergdahls' home.

"It's not the worst news," an officer told the couple. "As of this morning, they told me your son has been listed as DUSTWUN. There was a 100 percent accountability muster this morning. Your son is off post. He's missing." Bob got back in his truck and finished his UPS route. It was only another couple of hours, he said, and there was no one around to replace him.

During the first week of Bowe's capture, his parents believed he would be rescued. "We thought they'd get him quickly," Jani recalls. His name hadn't been released publicly, and the couple had only told their close family about his disappearance. At their daughter's Fourth of July party a few days later, they told their friends that Bowe was missing and that it was about to come out in the media. On July 7th, after Bowe's name was officially released, the national press descended on Hailey, gathering at Zaney's, the coffee shop where Bowe had worked.

It wasn't long, though, before his parents began to grow frustrated by how the government was treating them in the midst of the ordeal. The Army, they felt, was subtly pressuring them not to speak to the press, and they were required to sign a nondisclosure agreement with the National Security

Agency in order to view classified and top-secret material. In addition, Bob believes the military began monitoring their phones in case the kidnappers called – standard procedure in a hostage situation, but one that also enabled the U.S. military to keep tabs on the family.

Things soon got worse. Ralph Peters, an action-thriller writer who serves as a "strategic analyst" for Fox News, took to the air to condemn Bowe as an "apparent deserter." The Taliban, he declared, could save the United States on "legal bills" by executing him. Horrified by such comments, Bob and Jani told their military liaison that they didn't want the Army to mount an operation to rescue Bowe, fearful that he'd be killed – either by accident, or even on purpose, by an aggrieved soldier or the U.S. military itself. There have certainly been soldiers who have joined the drumbeat of hatred against Bowe: A recent Facebook post from one soldier in his unit called for his execution. Worried that any further public attention might put Bowe at greater risk, his parents decided to remain silent, releasing a statement to their local newspaper asking the press to respect their privacy.

In what appears to be an unprecedented move, the Pentagon also scrambled to shut down any public discussion of Bowe. Members of Bowe's brigade were required to sign nondisclosure agreements as part of their paperwork to leave Afghanistan. The agreement, according to Capt. Fancey, forbids them to discuss any "personnel recovery" efforts – an obvious reference to Bowe. According to administration sources, both the Pentagon and the White House also pressured major news outlets like *The New York Times* and the AP to steer clear of mentioning Bowe's name to avoid putting him at further risk. (The White House was afraid hard-line elements could execute him to scuttle peace talks, officials involved in the press negotiations say.) Faced with the wall of official silence, Bob and Jani began to worry that the Pentagon wasn't doing all that it could to get their son back. As Bowe's sister, Sky, wrote in a private e-mail: "I am afraid our government here in D.C. would like nothing better but to sweep PFC Bergdahl under the rug and wash their hands of him."

The first propaganda video of Bowe surfaced in July 2009. It was eventually followed by three others – the most recent from May of last year. Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, released a statement in September 2010 claiming Bowe as a prisoner – an example, he said, of America's "humiliation and disgrace."

The videos show a steep decline in Bowe's appearance and mental health. In the first two videos he displays a measured calm, a kind of doped-out serenity that is missing from the most recent installments. Each is typical jihadist propaganda, using Bowe to recite lines criticizing American foreign policy. Intelligence reports suggest that Bowe was moved into Pakistan sometime in late 2009 or 2010, where he is being held by the Haqqani network, an insurgent group with links to Al Qaeda that has joined the Taliban in fighting the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. It's also a group that, before the attacks of September 11th, was funded by the CIA. The network, which now has ties to the Pakistani government, is likely living under the protection of the Pakistani intelligence service, as Osama bin Laden and other top Al Qaeda leaders did for years.

Bowe's parents believe that he has been moved repeatedly to avoid the constant drone strikes along the Pakistan border, and is possibly being kept close to high-level leaders of the Haqqani network. For his part, Bowe does not appear to be a willing hostage. Last year, in August or September, he reportedly managed to escape. When he was recaptured, he put up such a struggle that it took five militants to overpower him. "He fought like a boxer," a Taliban fighter who had seen Bowe told Sami Yousafzai, a *Newsweek* reporter with legendary contacts among the Taliban. According to Yousafzai, sources among the militants say that Bowe is now "kept shackled at night" and is being moved back and forth across the border to keep his position from being discovered.

The Pentagon insists that it is "doing everything possible" to get Bowe home, and a large photo of the captive soldier hangs in CENTCOM headquarters, a daily reminder to those working to free him. Last year, according to officials close to the negotiations, Bowe's name took center stage during peace talks with the Taliban. The negotiations are being handled by an interagency team comprised of representatives from the State Department, the Defense Department and the White House, who have traveled to Germany and Qatar to meet with the Taliban. (One of Obama's top advisers on national security, Denis McDonough, has been intimately involved in the talks.) In return for Bowe, U.S. officials have offered to swap five of the 3,000 Afghan prisoners being held by American forces. At least one of those prisoners, according to a senior U.S. official familiar with the talks, is more or less a moderate. "I've seen the files, and it's slim," says the official. "Things like, he used to meet with Iranian officials when he worked in the government of Herat. That's nothing."

Officially, Bowe remains a soldier in good standing in the United States Army. He has continued to receive promotions over the past three years, based on his time in uniform, and he now holds the rank of sergeant. Unofficially, however, his status within the military is sharply contested. According to officials familiar with the internal debate, there are those in both Congress and the Pentagon who view Bowe as a deserter, and perhaps even a traitor. As with everything in Washington these days, the sharp political discord has complicated efforts to secure his release.

"The Hill is giving State and the White House shit," says one senior administration source. "The political consequences are being used as leverage in the policy debate." According to White House sources, Marc Grossman, who replaced Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, was given a direct warning by the president's opponents in Congress about trading Bowe for five Taliban prisoners during an election year. "They keep telling me it's going to be Obama's Willie Horton moment," Grossman warned the White House. The threat was as ugly as it was clear: The president's political enemies were prepared to use the release of violent prisoners to paint Obama as a Dukakis-like appeaser, just as Republicans did to the former Massachusetts governor during the 1988 campaign. In response, a White House official advised Grossman that he should ignore the politics of the swap and concentrate solely on the policy.

"Frankly, we don't give a shit why he left," says one White House official. "He's an American soldier. We want to bring him home."

The tensions came to a boil in January, when administration officials went to Capitol Hill to brief a handful of senators on the possibility of a prisoner exchange. The meeting, which excluded staffers, took place in a new secure conference room in the Capitol visitor center. According to sources in the briefing, the discussion sparked a sharp exchange between Senators John McCain and John Kerry, both of whom were decorated for their service in Vietnam. McCain, who endured almost six years of captivity as a prisoner of war, threw a fit at the prospect of releasing five Taliban detainees.

"They're the five biggest murderers in world history!" McCain fumed.

Kerry, who supported the transfer, thought that was going a bit far. "John," he said, "the five biggest murderers in the world?"

McCain was furious at the rebuke. "They killed Americans!" he responded. "I suppose Senator Kerry is OK with that?"

McCain reluctantly came around on the prisoner exchange, according to those present at the meeting, but he has continued to speak out against negotiating with the Taliban. Opposition has also come from Sen. Saxby Chambliss, a Republican from Georgia who won election with a vicious smear campaign against former Sen. Max Cleland, a decorated Vietnam veteran who lost three limbs in the war. Chambliss, according to Bowe's father, has insisted that America shouldn't make a prisoner trade for a "deserter."

Some top-level officials within the administration, including Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, are very wary about making a swap for Bowe. "Panetta and Hillary don't give a shit about getting him home," says one senior U.S. official involved in the negotiations. "They want to be able to say they COINed their way out of Afghanistan, or whatever, so it doesn't look like they are cutting and running." (Both Clinton and Panetta, by law, would have to sign off on any exchange.) As with Vietnam, many in the military are resisting any attempt to end the war. "Even after Robert Bales" – the Army staff sergeant charged with massacring 17 Afghan civilians in March – "they are making the argument that the war is turning a corner," says this official. "They don't realize that the mission is changing. We don't need all those U.S. soldiers there anymore."

Those in the Pentagon who oppose the prisoner exchange have insisted that the deal would send the wrong message to America's enemies. "The Pentagon is making the argument that American soldiers would become targets for kidnapping," says a senior administration official. "We pushed back on that. They already are – the Taliban and Al Qaeda have been using their resources to kidnap Americans for years." Prisoner exchanges take place at the ground level all the time in Afghanistan, and Gen. David Petraeus, now the head of the CIA, has pointed out in discussions about Bowe that U.S. forces made distasteful swaps in Iraq – including one involving Qais Khazali, a Shiite extremist who orchestrated the kidnapping and execution of four U.S. soldiers in Karbala in 2007. Even a hard-line Israeli nationalist like Benjamin Netanyahu has recognized the value of a single soldier: In October, the prime minister agreed to free 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli corporal who had been held captive by Hamas for five years. The move was overwhelmingly supported by the majority of Israelis. "The Israelis really care about the value of one life," says a senior U.S. official. "Does the American public?"

Despite the objections to the swap, U.S. officials involved in the negotiations this winter say they were on the verge of completing the deal to free Bowe. The White House had worked up talking points about Bowe, and was ready to go public about the exchange. (According to administration officials, the Pentagon insisted that the talking points note that Bowe had walked off base, to underscore that U.S. soldiers are not an easy target for kidnapping.) But at the last moment, the Taliban themselves balked at the deal, which stipulates that the detainees would not be allowed to leave the country of Qatar after their release. In March, faced with internal opposition over cutting a deal with the Americans, the Taliban abruptly suspended the peace talks. "Bowe Bergdahl has been a topic in any meeting we ever had with the Taliban," says a senior State Department official involved with the negotiations. "The Taliban suspended the talks on March 15th. We have not been in any contact with them since."

In a sense, Bowe represents a threat to anyone who wants to see the war continue – be they Taliban militants or Pentagon generals. Once the last American POW is released, there will be few obstacles standing in the way of a negotiated settlement. "It's the hard-liners on both sides who want to keep this thing going," says a White House official. "The Taliban is struggling with its own hard-liners. They need space, and this confidence-building measure could give them space."

There is still hope that a deal could get done – a hope that persists in the White House, in Bowe's old unit, and among Bowe's family. Over Memorial Day weekend, Bob and Jani Bergdahl traveled to Washington, D.C. A POW-advocacy organization called Rolling Thunder had asked Bob to give a speech at the group's annual gathering at the National Mall, the famous park across from the U.S. Capitol that hosted some of the most powerful anti-war demonstrations of the Vietnam War. The parents accepted the invitation out of desperation. Bob has considered going over to Pakistan – he's grown a bushy beard, and he has sent his own YouTube video, directed at the Taliban, asking for his son's release. "I'll talk to them," he says. "I'll bring him home myself."

Bob and Jani had thought they might meet the president during their trip to Washington, but that didn't happen. Instead, Bob took to the microphone to speak directly to America, and, perhaps, to his son. In front of the podium crouched a man in a bamboo tiger cage, a symbolic piece of theater the organization presents each year to remind everyone of prisoners of war from another era.

"My son is not in a cage, but he is in chains," Bob said. "Bowe, if you can hear me, you are not forgotten, and so help me God, we will bring you home. Your family has not forgotten you, your hometown has not forgotten you, Idaho has not forgotten you, and thanks to all the people here, Washington, D.C., will not forget you."

When he was finished, he grasped the hand of the man in the tiger cage. The man looked startled. It seemed like a long time since anyone had stepped forward to acknowledge he was there.

Matthew Farwell, a former soldier who deployed to Afghanistan, contributed additional reporting to this story.

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http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/americas-last-prisoner-of-war-20120607